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ABSTRACT

A teacher of English as a second language in a Japanese university found that despite large classes and time limitations, by changing four aspects of classroom instruction, the students increased their language capabilities and confidence. The four aspects are the teacher's role, the student's role, classroom materials, and student evaluation. The teacher's role changed from that of director and controller of learning to catalyst and monitor. The student's role changed from that of passive recipient of learning to an active determiner of personal language development, involved in most classroom decision-making. The learning materials used in class were generally what students produced and brought to class, including journal entries, discussion topics, special projects, skits, reading materials, and videotapes. Students were evaluated on a point system based solely on the quantity, rather than quality, of their interaction with the target language, allowing them to interact freely in the four language skills. Of 231 students in the group studied, only three did not receive passing grades, a substantial reduction in percentage. Students produced large volumes of written material in English and read large quantities of English text, and reported or recorded special efforts to practice oral communicative skills. (MSE)

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Giving Students the Freedom to Learn

Japanese students come to the university their freshman year with a wealth of linguistic knowledge of the English language. They have spent the previous six years memorizing sentence patterns, vocabulary lists, and grammar rules in preparation for a rigourous entrance exam. Yet, these same students have little or no performance ability in the language. They can produce a wide array of sentences on a paper and pencil test but have no confidence in using these same sentences for communicative purposes written or spoken. The English language to the Japanese student is not a tool for communication but an academic hurdle.

Japanese university language classes are large. It is not uncommon for a class roster to contain forty to fifty student names. These classes generally meet one time a week for ninety minutes, twenty-five to thirty times during the course of the year. Under these circumstances, students do not have a chance at becoming proficient in the language if teachers use traditional teaching methods (teacher-directed, textbook-based, test-evaluated). Innovative approaches are needed to accomodate these students.

Two major problems in this system are evident: class-size and the time limitation. While it is not always possible to make alterations in the system itself, by, for example, limiting class size and/or increasing the class meeting times, it is possible to make changes in the classroom in order to allow the students the chance to progress in their language study. I found that by altering four aspects of the class, the students gained in their language capabilities and confidence in spite of the unfavorable learning conditions outlined above. The four are, the role of the teacher, the role of the student, classroom materials, and student evaluation.

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The Students

The students (totaling 231 students divided into seven classes) were either in their first or second year of the required English language classes. All of the students were non-English majors. The classes were comparatively smaller than those described above, with an average of 33 students per class, still quite larger, though, than that what most language teachers would consider to be an ideal class size. The level of motivation in these classes is low and the classes are required. Other teachers have complained that these students are difficult if not impossible to teach due to a a lack of motivation or interest.

The Role of the Teacher

My role as the teacher of the class changed from that of a director and controller of learning to that of a catalyst and a monitor of learning. I found that I could play a more productive role in the class by stepping back and allowing the students the chance to experiment with their personal language study rather than dictating which pages to study or which assignments to complete. I came to realize that the more the students were focusing their attention on my instruction, the less chance they potentially had to gain in the target language. As the year progressed, the students came to rely on my experience in language study rather than my expertise in language usage. My advising them on ways to study language was of greater value to them then that as a language instructor.

The Role of the Students

The role of the students in these classes changed from that of a passive recipient of learning to an active determiner of their personal language development. They were involved in most of the decision making that went on in the classroom concerning learning materials. They were allowed to choose their own topics for discussion and writing, as well as their

reading materials. Whenever possible, they could also choose the listening materials for the class. By giving the students the freedom to make these decisions, I hoped that the students would make decisions based on their personal needs and interests. This in turn would encourage them to invest more of a personal interest in the class.

Classroom Materials

The learning materials used in the class were, for the most part, what the students produced and brought to the class. The entries they made in journals that they exchanged with a fellow classmate provided the students with a motive for writing and, at the same time, a motive for reading. Their "text" for conversation consisted of topics chosen by students themselves for the fifteen-minute free discussion period that started each class. They also created and carried out special projects. The students wrote short skits, led the class in activities, and conducted polls on campus.

The students also chose their own reading materials. They were asked to read at least four books, magazine and/or newspaper articles over the course of the year and write a short (one to two page) report on the contents of the reading. Listening materials were mostly chosen by me. The traditional classroom is not constructed in a way that allows for individual listening practice. Whenever possible, though, the students voted on which video or story would be used in the class. Students were also encouraged to use the media room at the university, which is equipped with private video and cassette tape machines. All materials chosen were authentic materials and not those that had been "cooked" for language students.

Evaluation

The students were graded on a point system based solely on the quantity, rather than the quality, of their interaction with the target language. Through allowing the students the chance to interact freely in the language

through the four major skills. I hoped that they would, first, gain confidence in using the language for communicative purposes, and second, gradually reduce their dependence upon the teacher so that they could continue to progress in the language even after their two-year foreign language requirement was completed. Thus, in the journals that they exchanged, they were given points for the number of pages they wrote. Their special projects were graded on effort rather than the linguistic quality of their project. They also received points for participating in the free conversation period (based on if they came to class on time and made an effort to speak in English during this time). Points were awarded as well, for reading reports, reports on audio cassette stories, and video recorded movies. Other self-chosen tasks included giving a speech in class or submitting a story that they had written. The students also evaluated their own progress by writing self-reflections at mid-year and at the end of the year (La Forge 1983).

Results

Of the 231 students who attended these classes, only three failed to receive a passing grade. (The overall average for this course was about three per class.) One hundred and sixteen students earned a grade of A+ or A (A and B respectively by the American system). For some students, though, the grade became secondary to their advancement in the language. Two students wrote over 180 pages in their exchange journals, three times more than what was required of them for an A+ in writing. (The students final grade was the average of four grades: writing, speaking, listening, and reading.) Another student, who had mentioned in his report on Toffler's The Third Wave that he had found the book difficult, insisted on reading the book again in English even after I had suggested he take a look at the Japanese version. Perhaps one comment made by a student in her self-reflection sums up a feeling shared by many other students. In response to a question asking what grade the students

thought they deserved for the class, she responded, "It is not important to me what grade I think I deserve as I am studying for me and not for the grade."

The students, I feel, gained a confidence in using English for communicative purposes. Many students reported this in their self-reflections. Students wrote that on occasion they approached a foreigner in distress and, using their "broken" English, offered assistance. One student wrote that although his English was not grammatically correct, he felt confident that he had communicated in the language.

The students also came to realize that English could also be studied outside of the formal education environment. One group of students helped a classmate who was hospitalized for most of the year by holding English conversations with him in the hospital. These talks were recorded and submitted to me. Another student made a habit of going over the events of the day in English as she commuted back to her home on the crowded train. Other students reported that they made attempts to watch video movies in English without reading the Japanese subtitles. The walls of the English "classroom" for these students had been extended to encompass their out-of-class lives.

Students averaged 27 written pages in their exchange journals. They used the journal as a tool to communicate their personal interests and needs as well as counsel their partner. Some students used the journal to finagle birthday presents from their partner. Others used it to encourage their partner to work hard in school. Two students wrote about the death of someone very close to them. Through the journal, the partner consoled the student in a time of sorrow. For these students, the journal had ceased to become an exercise in English language study and had become an avenue for meaningful communication.

Conclusion

The approach described above is based on principles of whole language

learning (Goodman & Goodman 1981, Goodman 1986). Four basic characteristics of this approach to learning are that 1. it is student-centered, 2. it is teacher-monitored, 3. it uses authentic classroom materials, and 4. students are intrinsically motivated. For language teachers teaching in a Japanese university, a whole language approach provides a way to overcome the problems of large class size and limited contact time. It provides a solution that does not necessitate changing the structure of the system itself but the structure of the classroom in which we find ourselves teaching.

This paper was originally presented at TESOL '88 in Chicago.

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